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AUTHOR	Patrick, John J.
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ABSTRACT

Leaders of nascent democracies, such as Lithuania, quickly understood that effective civic education is indispensable to the establishment, maintenance, and improvement of their institutions of government and civil society. They readily turned to civic educators in the United States, the world's oldest democracy, for advice about how to prepare children to be competent citizens. Interactions of U.S. civic educators with educators in newer democracies have stimulated renewal and reform of education for democracy in the United States. This paper identifies 10 trends in education for democracy in the United States, including systematic emphasis on the teaching and learning of the core concepts in the theory of democracy, systematic development of decision-making skills, encouragement of students to participate in extracurricular activities conducive to education for democratic citizenship, and the establishment and maintenance of an ethos of democracy in the school. The 10 trends provide a brief overview of practices in civics that are strongly recommended by leaders and reformers of education for democracy in the United States. (BT)

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TEN TRENDS IN EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

By John J. Patrick
Indiana University, Bloomington, U.S.A.

This paper was presented at the "International Symposium on the Importance of Civic Education for Positive Socialization in Society, December 9, 2002 at the Vilnius Pedagogical University in Vilnius, Lithuania

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TEN TRENDS IN EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

By John J. Patrick (Vilnius, Lithuania, December 9, 2002)

Since the 1980s, there has been a global surge of democracy, which has prompted a corresponding surge in democratic civic education in schools throughout the world. Leaders of nascent democracies, such as Lithuania, have quickly understood that effective civic education is indispensable to the establishment, maintenance, and improvement of their institutions of government and civil society. So, they readily turned to civic educators in the United States of America, our world's oldest democracy, for advice about how to prepare children to be competent citizens. Interactions of American civic educators, like me, with educators in newer democracies, such as Lithuania, have stimulated renewal and reform of education for democracy in the United States. In this brief presentation, I identify ten trends in education for democracy in America. This list of trends and my brief discussion of them provide an overview for you of the current trends in the reform and renewal of civic education for democracy in America.

1. The first trend is conceptualization or definition of civic education in terms of four interrelated components: civic knowledge, cognitive civic skills, participatory civic skills, and civic dispositions. The first component, civic knowledge, consists of basic concepts and information that students must know if they would become competent citizens of a democracy. Concepts in the theory and practice of democracy, such as representative government, popular sovereignty, constitutional government, the rule of law, human rights, and citizenship, must be understood by students if they would know what democracy is and is not. And information about the Constitution of the United States, institutions of the federal and state governments, and the behavioral expectations of citizens must be understood by students if they would become competent participants in their democracy.

Cognitive civic skills, the second component of civic education, are the intellectual operations that enable students to identify, describe, interpret, explain, and evaluate events in their democratic government and civil society. These cognitive skills enable students to use their civic knowledge to make reasonable decisions about public policy issues, to justify these decisions, and to carry out or implement the decisions.

Participatory civic skills involve actions by individuals to monitor and influence public policies and the resolution of public issues. These skills of participation, in tandem with cognitive skills, enable students to cooperate to promote personal and common interests.

Civic dispositions, the fourth component in the typical American framework of civic education, are the traits of character needed by individuals to preserve and improve their democratic government and civil society. Examples of these dispositions are temperance or self-regulation, compassion, tolerance, courage, loyalty, honesty, charity, and civility.

2. The second trend is a systematic emphasis on the teaching and learning of the core concepts or ideas in the theory of democracy and information about government and civil society that exemplifies the core concepts. By increasing the exposure of students to core content in the theory and practice of democracy in America, we increase the probability that they will master these ideas and remember information related to them. In addition, our research indicates that mastery of core concepts about democracy is related positively to achievement of civic skills and dispositions and to desirable democratic behavior, such as a propensity to vote and otherwise participate in government and civil society, to be interested in politics, and to respect the worth and dignity of other persons.

3. The third trend is using legal court cases or cases of political behavior to integrate the teaching and learning of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Dramatic stories or cases of human behavior tend to attract the interest of students and to challenge them to use core concepts to analyze, explain, and make decisions about the issues presented in the cases. And the cases portray positive and negative human behavior and thereby contribute to the teaching of civic dispositions. So this method of teaching with cases brings the vitality and reality of human behavior in a democracy into the classroom and requires the integrated teaching and learning of all four components in the framework for civic education widely used in American schools.

4. The fourth trend is systematic development of decision-making skills. Case studies of political and legal issues, as well as inquiries into

community problems, are used by teachers to develop decision-making skills of students. The issues raised by case studies or community-based inquiries are occasions for decisions by students, who are then taught to examine the alternative choices, the likely consequences of each choice, and how to justify or defend their choice in response to the issue. The systematic teaching of decision-making skills in response to public policy issues is an especially effective method for teaching cognitive civic skills.

5. The fifth trend is the establishment by teachers of open classroom conditions of teaching and learning. These desirable classroom conditions are conducive to free and open exchange of opinions by students about public issues and policies. In such classroom conditions, students feel secure about freely investigating controversial topics, and they are not afraid to openly and candidly express their beliefs. Our research shows that this kind of classroom situation is related to development by students of such positive civic dispositions as tolerance, propensity to participate, and political interest.

6. The sixth trend is encouragement of students to participate in extracurricular activities that are conducive to education for democratic citizenship. Our research reveals that there is a strong positive relationship between participation in student organizations and team sports and the development of participatory civic skills and civic dispositions. The positive results are maximized when teachers help students to make connections between democratic civic learning in the classroom and similar learning in extracurricular activities outside the formal learning of the classroom.

7. The seventh trend is encouragement of students to participate in civic activities in the community outside the school. American students have increasingly been encouraged or even compelled to participate in community service learning activities. Service learning involves doing worthy tasks in the community outside the school that contribute to the common good. Thus, students may learn participatory civic skills and civic dispositions by practicing these skills and dispositions through tasks performed individually or cooperatively with others. Our research shows that service learning activities in the community are most likely to increase the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions of students only when they are

connected systematically to learning activities in the curriculum and classrooms of the school.

8. The eighth trend is teaching and learning about democracy and citizenship across the curriculum and from primary schools through the final year of high school. Lessons in civics begin in kindergarten and the first grade, and they continue until the students depart from high school after completing the 12th grade. The teaching and learning of civics occur in separate courses on citizenship and government. For example, virtually all students in the United States are required to complete a high school course about American government. However, teaching and learning about civics and government also occur in courses in literature, economics, geography, history, and social studies. In particular, courses in American history, European history, and world history are used to teach the history of democracy.

9. The ninth trend is to establish and maintain an ethos or spirit of democracy in the school. When an ethos of democracy prevails in the school, students have confidence that their human rights will be protected and that their dignity and individually will be recognized and respected. Further, in such an atmosphere, students are encouraged to participate in the social and civic life of the school. Our research shows that there is a positive relationship between a prevailing ethos of democracy in the school and the development of democratic civic skills and civic dispositions.

10. The tenth trend is to conjoin content and processes in the teaching and learning of civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions. Civic skills and dispositions are inseparable from a body of civic knowledge or content. They cannot be taught and learned effectively in isolation from one another. So, teachers have been encouraged to connect or integrate all four components of the commonly used framework for civic education in their units of classroom instruction.

In conclusion, the list and discussion of ten trends presented in this paper provide a brief overview of practices in civics that are strongly recommend by leaders and reformers of education for democracy in the United States. I hope that my presentation of them to you will encourage or reinforce the use of these pedagogical practices in Lithuania.

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